

**West Mojave Plan
Task Group I
Green Tree Inn, Victorville
December 1, 2000**

Attendees

Task Group: Ileene Anderson, Ray Arthur, Margie Balfour, Ray Bransfield, Paul Condon, Michael Connor, Sharon Girod, Art Gleason, Mark Hagan, Gerry Hillier, Ted James, Manuel Joia, Becky Jones, Peter Kiriakos, Paul Kober, Charles LaClaire, Laurie Lile, Steven Morgan, Lisa Northrup, John O’Gara, Doug Parham, Bob Parker, Steve Pennix, Alan Pickard, Mickey Quillman, Tim Read, Bob Sackett, Jim Schroeter, Courtney Smith, Bob Strub, Donna Thomas, Ed Waldheim, Arden Wallum, Marcia Wertenberger, Ric Williams.

West Mojave Team Staff: Bill Haigh, Larry LaPre, Ed LaRue and Valery Pilmer.

Introduction

Bill Haigh opened the meeting at 9:45 AM.

Meeting Notes: No changes were requested to the notes for the Task Group 1 meeting held on November 1, 2000.

Updates:

- Tortoise write-up: The revisions to the tortoise strategy based on Task Group and Subcommittee input to date are underway. Ed LaRue will work with the subcommittees and incorporate any additional recommendations. He will also prepare an alternative tortoise strategy that takes into account the Ft. Irwin expansion area. Copies of these will be e-mailed to Task Group 1 members prior to the January 18, 2001 meeting. The revised tortoise strategy will be the primary topic for discussion at the January meeting.
- Fort Irwin update: Action is expected on legislation in Congress shortly after December 5th. If action is taken prior to the December 20th Super Group meeting, details will be provided at that meeting.

Mohave Ground Squirrel Discussion

Bill Haigh opened the discussion by noting that while the proposed Mohave Ground Squirrel (MGS) chapter represents a strategy that would be acceptable to Fish and Game, it’s provisions are not locked in concrete. The 10:1 compensation ratio was suggested as a starting point, and is expected to receive significant discussion and modification.

Ed LaRue presented the overall strategy. The following key points were made:

- The MGS differs from the tortoise in that it is state listed as threatened, but has not been listed by United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). This affects how the species is dealt with on military bases.
Ray Bransfield indicated that USFWS received a petition to list the MGS some time ago, however, species not listed by the state have received a higher priority. The fact the species has not been listed by USFWS is not an indication that the Service does not consider MGS threatened, just that it is less so than other species in need of federal protection. One reason the USFWS has not yet listed the MGS is because it already receives protection as a state-listed species.
- The entire known range of the MGS is within the West Mojave Planning Area. MGS has the smallest range of any known mammal.
- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has recognized crucial habitat for the MGS in the California Desert Plan since 1980.
- MGS populations respond most directly to rainfall. Predation does not appear to be a major factor.
- It is unknown what the MGS tolerance is to urbanization. The species has been trapped in urbanized and degraded areas.
- The proposed conservation area boundary encompasses predominantly public lands. Meetings with local jurisdictions and individuals will result in adjustments.
- The MGS strategy originally proposed a “provisional” conservation area for MGS for a period of 10 years, during which time additional research on the species would take place. USFWS, however, indicated that unless a permanent conservation area was provided immediately, they could not support the proposal. As a result, the provisional aspects of the strategy were dropped. Future study remains key to know more about the MGS.

Pete Kiriakos commented that the study of MGS is needed over the long term. He also asked whether DOD would consider funding MGS research.

Michael Connor asked that the strategy incorporate a means to modify the conservation area in response to research findings. He noted that Dr. Phil Leitner, a recognized expert on the MGS, has expressed concern about the proposed conservation area boundary. Bill Haigh noted that the plan will incorporate an adaptive management strategy and will have a mechanism in place to allow for plan amendments in response to new information.

Alan Pickard discussed the MGS Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and clarified that the group consists of the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), military, BLM, etc. and includes both managers and scientists. Becky Jones chairs the group. There are \$1 million in mitigation funds held by the state to do MGS studies. Although this is not enough to fund all the studies which the TAG would like to undertake, the TAG can use these funds as seed money for grants and matching funds to pay for future studies.

Pete Kiriakos asked that the TAG provide more specific guidance, and that funding sources to sustain MGS studies over the long term be identified.

- Ed LaRue further described the strategy, including the following elements: 1) Designate a one-mile transition area (BTA) around pertinent portions of the MGS conservation area. 2) Designate an area in northeastern LA County where existing zoning would not be changed over the life of the plan. 3) Conduct focused trapping efforts for the MGS in the northern portions of the Antelope Valley, in Kern County.

Mike Connor asked whether plans exist to consolidate public lands in the northern Antelope Valley area. Ed LaRue responded that public lands in this area are not slated for disposal.

The need for a transition area was questioned. Staff responded that the purpose is to ensure that the integrity of the conservation area is maintained. Mike Connor noted that the BTA for the MGS is different than the BTA for the tortoise, as no clearance survey would be required in the MGS BTAs.

Ed LaRue indicated that the proposal for existing zoning to remain for the life of the plan in a portion of LA County was discussed with the county. The County may be proposing modifications to the Significant Ecological Areas (SEA) identified by their General Plan. These changes may provide the additional protection sought for the MGS in this area. Ilene Anderson expressed concern about depending on the SEAs to provide adequate protection for the species. Ray Bransfield echoed her concerns.

It was noted that most of the private lands in Inyo County were included within the conservation area boundaries. Ed LaRue indicated that meetings need to take place with Inyo County representatives to consider this issue.

Pete Kiriakos asked that the use of conservation easements be considered, since this species seems to have different living requirements than the tortoise. He feels this would help maintain property rights while considering the needs of the animal.

Steve Morgan asked whether the conservation area and plan would be needed if the MGS were delisted. Ray Bransfield noted that if USFWS perceives that bad biology is used in a delisting, they would move forward with a federal listing. He emphasized that USFWS has not looked harder at the species since it is already receiving state protection.

- A 10:1 compensation ratio was suggested by the Evaluation Report for the MGS conservation area.

Bill Haigh clarified that this ratio is not based on any scientific criteria, and came about as a result of a number “thrown out” during a meeting. This is not an established number, and will be fully discussed by this task group.

Becky Jones indicated that current mitigation for the ground squirrel depends on the habitat. The ratio for lower quality habitat is currently 1:1, while higher quality habitat can be 5:1. She believed that where tortoise and MGS conservation areas overlap, the larger compensation value should apply.

Ted James asked that a nexus document discussing the relationship between the compensation ratio and the impact be prepared to help form a rational basis for a fee.

Bob Strub asked whether grandfathering would be allowed for those who have already provided compensation for MGS. Becky Jones indicated this should be allowed.

Pete Kiriakos stated that the Sierra Club is interested in more than just a compensation fee. They would like to see jurisdictions take some reasonable precautions to protect the ground squirrel on private land within their areas.

It was noted that Inyo County needs special consideration as the county has little private land and already receives the maximum amount allowed as Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) payment. Gerry Hillier noted that the National Association of Counties (NACO) is currently laying the groundwork for legislation to amend PILT. They hope to amend the formula to reflect federal land acquisitions.

Ted James noted that compensation requirements for MGS have differed significantly between CDFG regions. Fresno requires no compensation for projects under Kern County jurisdiction. He sees a need for a rational and scientific basis as well as a need for consistency. If the jurisdictions have nothing to gain from participating in the plan, they won't participate.

Alan Pickard, Deputy Regional Director of CDFG Region 6, responded by stating that he discussed the inconsistencies between CDFG Region 4 (Kern County) and Region 6 (remainder of the planning area) with Region 4 management. He assured the Task Group that as of November 30, 2000, the inconsistencies are at an end.

The approach currently followed by Region 6 will be applied by Region 4.

- Ed LaRue noted that the conservation area mapping has some inaccuracies and will be corrected. He also noted that the map displaying MGS locations (red dot map) displays cumulative information on the ground squirrel.

Mike Connor asked whether it is possible to display sightings that have occurred only within the last 10 years to get a better picture of current conditions.

- Ray Bransfield suggested that a presentation on the life history of the MGS be made at a future meeting. It was suggested that a photo of the ground squirrel be provided or posted on the West Mojave web site.

- The following specific comments were made regarding the MGS Chapter.

Ileene Anderson:

1. How will the new grazing standards and guidelines be incorporated into the Plan? Her understanding is that each of the three regional plans will incorporate these standards.
2. Page 3.31 regarding "voluntary retirement of cattle allotments." She feels this should include all grazing allotments.
3. Page 3.28 regarding the Rand Management Plan. She asked whether this plan would be wrapped into the West Mojave Plan for implementation. Bob Parker stated that there is currently no budget to fully implement the Rand Plan. Bill Haigh indicated that the Rand Plan is on its own implementation schedule; the West Mojave Plan will affect this only if it is determined through the planning process that the Rand Plan needs to be amended.
4. Page 3.17. The number of acres of critical habitat needs correcting.
5. Regarding plant harvesting. Does not want salvage to be allowed. This needs to be defined differently. It was agreed that both "harvest" and "salvage" need clear

definition. Bob Parker indicated that most harvesting in the West Mojave involves seed harvesting.

Ed Waldheim:

6. Page 3.29 under recreation. Cross out horseback riding to match how the tortoise chapter was handled.
7. Page A3-7. The Biological Opinion for the Rand Management Plan never intended to take dual sport or competitive sports out of the plan, yet an event was recently prohibited. He feels the language needs to be very clear in the section dealing with Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation to keep these kinds of things from happening.

Donna Thomas:

8. Regarding fallow agricultural fields: If fallow fields are restored to create tortoise habitat, will we be destroying MGS habitat? By helping one species, are we affecting another? Alan Pickard was uncertain how this would be viewed. The group agreed that as work progresses, this issue needs consideration.

Ray Arthur (Ridgecrest Film Commission)

9. Page 3-27 regarding commercial filming: Why does text state that filming *may* take place in the MGS conservation area rather than *shall*? The City of Ridgecrest has special procedures in place for filming. Bob Parker (BLM) will provide a copy of the procedures to Bill Haigh. These will be presented to the Task Group for possible incorporation into the West Mojave Plan.

Mike Connor:

10. Feels that the Biological Goals need to be stated more clearly. As currently written, they do not set measurable biological standards which can be used to judge the success of the MGS conservation strategy.

Wrap-up

- **MGS Subcommittee Assignments:** Bill Haigh suggested that the Task Group members break out into subcommittees to discuss key components of the MGS strategy. The following subcommittee assignments were made:

Compensation (Both MGS and Tortoise)

Laurie Lile (City of Palmdale) (Chairperson)

City of Ridgecrest

Ray Bransfield (USFWS)

Paul Condon (California City)

Becky Jones (CDFG)

Lisa Northrup (San Bernardino County)

Lorelei Oviatt (Kern County)

Courtney Smith (Inyo County)

Mohave Ground Squirrel Biological Goals

Michael Connor (DTPC)

Becky Jones (CDFG)

Pete Kiriakos (Sierra Club)

Lorelei Oviatt (Kern County)
Courtney Smith (Inyo County)

Mohave Ground Squirrel Research

Becky Jones (CDFG)
Michael Connor (DTPC)
Pete Kiriakos (Sierra Club)
Bob Parker (or Joyce Schlacter BLM)

▪ **Future Meeting Dates:**

Next Task Group 1 meeting scheduled for January 18, 2001
Future Task Group 1 meeting scheduled for Friday February 23, 2001
Super Group Meeting: Scheduled for December 20, 2000